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Extensive Reading Project using Graded Readers in a University Classroom

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Abstract

Research into Extensive Reading (ER) has a long history as an effective method in facilitating language learning for learners. One of the many approaches in conducting ER successfully is through the use of graded readers. Despite its benefits, not much attention has been given to ER using graded readers among English as a Second Language (ESL) university students in Malaysia. This study explores the influence of ER project with the use of graded readers among control (n=90) and experimental (n=125) groups of undergraduate university students enrolled in various compulsory English courses during a 14-week academic calendar. ER project was conducted to supplement learning through various in class projects. Data was collected through the use of pre- and post-tests, progress tests as well as extensive reading tests obtained through Edinburgh Project in Extensive Reading (EPER). Results indicated no significance difference among control and experimental groups for pre-tests, post-tests and extensive reading tests. These results carry important implications on pedagogical and methodological aspects of language teaching and learning, which are further discussed in the paper.

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Keywords: Graded readers; Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading; Extensive reading; University students

INTRODUCTION

One of the many reading instructions that has become of interest for many researchers and educators is Extensive Reading (ER). This is because ER incorporates the idea of reading in large amounts of texts for general understanding with the purpose of increasing learners' interest and motivation. To achieve this, ER should be conducted in a relaxing environment that allow learners to pick their own reading materials based on their interest and general proficiency level (Chin-Neng Chen, Shu-Chu Chen, Shu-Hui Eileen Chen, & Shyh-Chyi Wey, 2013). In doing so, ER has shown an increase in vocabulary acquisition, reading speed and ability for language learners (Al-Nafisah, 2015) which obviously benefits the performance of all language skills. However, the benefits of ER are not limited to reading alone.

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Learners who engage with ER are also likely to gain an increased knowledge of the world (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). This means that ER in an L2 context could be used to support the broader curriculum objectives if non-fiction texts were used to support other classroom content. Learners who engage with ER also tend to be more motivated learners, and this may in part be because ER promotes learner autonomy, which itself can have a powerful impact on motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Overall, research suggests that ER not only supports reading skills development, but also overall linguistic proficiency (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Although a growing interest in ER is increasing because of its promising results, however, in Malaysia, not much attention has been given on implementing ER in the university curriculum. This could be caused by several reasons such as time constraints. To overcome this, conducting reading circle programs together with reading resources such as graded readers should be an initiative taken by the university to foster reading habits among learners. In fact, reading is such a required skill at the university but is not given much official attention. Even though Malaysia uses English as the medium of instruction in most universities, learners do not read enough.

Research has proven that there is also a strong correlation between reading and academic success, which means that proficient readers tend to do better academically than less proficient readers (Al-Nafisah 2015). Hence, the best means in increasing learners' language proficiency is to assist them to read extensively (Ying-Chun, 2015). As such, this study was designed to explore the influence of Extensive Reading Project (ERP) among control and experimental groups of students. The research hypotheses in this study are:

- 1) There is no significant difference between Pre-test reading proficiency scores (PPT B) for control group and Pre-test reading proficiency scores (PPT B) for experimental group.
- 2) There is significant difference between Post-test reading proficiency scores (PPT E) for control group and Post-test reading proficiency scores (PPT E) for experimental group.
- 3) There is no significant difference between Extensive Reading Test Version 1 (ERT V1) for experimental group and Extensive Reading Test Version 1 (ERT V1) scores for the control group.
- 4) There is significant difference between Extensive Reading Test Version 2 (ERT V2) for experimental group and Extensive Reading Test Version 2 (ERT V2) scores for the control group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Background

Reading is considered significantly important in a second language. It is considered an active process which learners go through in making meaning because they evaluate, synthesize and interpret the text they are reading (Nor Fariza, Hazita, & Afendi, 2013). In light of this, reading models are important in understanding the reading process. The reading models that were important in this study were bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up models are text driven models of comprehension which involves an encoding process of the text symbols that is analyzed from left to right to words which is then interpreted to become meaningful. The significance of the bottom-up's model to L2 reading is reflected on the mental mechanics used by L2 learners to create a mental translation of the knowledge pieced together from very little information from background knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2013).

Top-down models on the other hand are reader-driven models developed and refined by Goodman (1968) and Smith (1971) emphasizing higher-level cognitive process which leads to the understanding of text itself. Goodman (1968) defines reading as a process that a reader tries to construct meanings from the writer's message through interaction with the writer's written text. Goodman laments that a reader reduces dependency of the printed phonics of the text and with the help of the reader's own knowledge of syntax and semantics through four processes namely; predicting, sampling, confirming and correcting. Hence, this study was mainly guided by bottom-up and top-down models in understanding the reading process that learners go through.

2.2 Extensive Reading Project

Numerous studies with different research designs report that ERP benefits learners in different contexts. A recent study concluded that ERP is beneficial for learners as the results indicated that it expounds reading comprehension (Kargar, 2012). ERP encourages learners to read a large number of books depending on their time and interest in the selection of books. However, the success of ERP depends on a vast number of factors. It is believed that in order for ERP to be successful, it is recommended that students read one graded reader per week (Day & Bamford, 2002). A more recent study (Brierley, Gillis-Furutaka, Niimura, Ruzicka, Takahashi & Yoshioka, 2019) added that a comprehensive graded reader database known as ER Cloud will significantly contribute to the success of ERP as it would combine the information available and provide administrators and teachers with more information on the books they select for and recommend to their students, and allow students to make better informed choices of what to read.

Only a few studies found contrasting results where ER did not have a positive effect on reading performance (Gao, 2004; Lai, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989) as cited in Al-Nafisah (2015). In general, numerous studies show that amount of reading engaged in ER correlates with overall reading development particularly improvements in reading fluency (Grabe, 2009) as the core principle of ER is to get students to read as naturally and as fluently as possible at their own level of proficiency (Waring & Husna, 2019).

One of the main projects in ER is conducted by Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER), which was established in 1981 by the Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh (Hill, 1992). However, it is now handed over to Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) that can be found on www.erfoundation.org. ERF is a non-profit, charitable organization which aims to support and promote ER. Under the auspices of ERF, thousands of institutions all over Asia have adopted the ER approach and ER Associations have been set up in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and elsewhere. In some of these areas, ER is considered well-established and a valuable part of the EFL curriculum (Waring & Husna, 2019).

One of the many purposes of ERF is to maintain a bibliography of research on ER and in setting up ER programs. Additionally, with its years of research into ER, EPER has come out with its lists of graded readers consisting of a variety of publishers. These graded readers are classified according to eight levels of difficulty. Since reading enjoyment is the most important factor in the ER programs, it is clear that EPER has considered the motivational factor through the use of graded materials (Bamford, 2004).

2.3 Graded Readers

There are currently many different systems that can be used to measure reading level (Waring & Husna, 2019) such as the Yomiyasusa Level (YL) created by Furukawa in 2003 and the international 20-level Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) graded reader scale that has been developed by Waring since 2016 (Brierley et al., 2019). However, the first comprehensive scale for measuring reading level was the EPER scale developed by Hill in the 1970s together with a directory of graded readers and ratings of how good the books were (Waring & Husna, 2019). Graded readers are written for language learners to increase their reading fluency and speed. Hill (2008) postulates that graded readers are written to cater for English learners by using limited lexis and syntax with the hopes of allowing learners to progress to reading unsimplified materials. This is because beginners are not interested in reading unsimplified reading materials because of its difficult language use (Waring, 1997).

For learners to progress in their reading, they should be introduced to materials of increasing levels of difficulty. Therefore, graded readers are intentionally written by increasing difficulty level through the use of vocabulary, plot and language (Waring, 1997). Claridge (2012) hypothesizes that some major publishers such as Penguin readers, Cambridge readers, Oxford Bookworms and Macmillan Readers prefer to publish fiction because fictional series are able to increase learners' fluency. These publishers believe that learners' needs are dependent on reader's culture and acceptance of topics. It is also important to note that publishers usually allocate their graded readers to levels in their own systems and sometimes the same publisher adopts different methods for determining level for different series (Brierley et al., 2019). For example, an Oxford

Bookworms Stage Three is not the same as an Oxford Classic Tales Level Three. Table 1 illustrates the eight levels of difficulty established by EPER.

As illustrated in Table 1, there are eight EPER reading levels, going from level G (the lowest EPER level) to level X (the highest EPER level). EPER reading level can be obtained through placement test scores. Based on EPER level obtained, learners would begin reading at their current proficiency level and progress to higher EPER reading levels in due time.

Table 1. EPER Level.

EPER Level	Average Vocabulary	Student Level
G	300	Starter
F	500	Beginner
E	800	Elementary
D	1200	Low intermediate
C	1600	Intermediate
B	1900	High intermediate
A	2200	Advanced
X	3000	Bridge

For example, in a study by Iwahori (2008), high school students in the study were allowed to select among 107 graded readers from Oxford University Press, Pearson Longman and Macmillan. The graded readers were used among high school students and it was found that it has increased students' reading comprehension. Similarly, Yamashita (2008), in a study among 38 Japanese university students, used 500 English graded readers from varying publishers such as Penguin, Oxford and Cambridge. Titles were selected by the students themselves based on their interests. Moreover, Walker (2011) used the same database created by EPER in her study where her graded readers were grouped from H to X and her students were assigned 16 to 96 pages in those novels.

Until recently however, not many have used graded readers in an ER environment. Most have preferred to allow learners to select their own reading materials based on their own reading level. Language instructors have the following reasons not to incorporate ER. First, they believe that intensive reading is sufficient to improve students' reading skills (Day & Bamford, 1998). Second, language instructors do not have enough time to incorporate ER in class as they have to follow a strict syllabus, or they would like to spend time on assessed content (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Other reasons include the lack of teacher's awareness of the nature and benefits of ER and the absence of assessment for ER (Macalister, 2010). These challenges make it difficult to implement an ERP as a part of a course, like how most ERP are usually carried out.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted at a university in East Coast of Malaysia. Students ranged in age between 19 – 23 years old from different race (i.e. Malay, Indian and Chinese) and gender. The data were taken from semester 2, September 2015 – January 2016 session. They were enrolled in various Science and Technology

bachelor degree courses located in two campuses; Pekan and Gambang. They were then put into control (n=90) and experimental (n=125) groups.

The participants of the study were selected through simple random sampling. Simple random sampling is a procedure where individuals have an equal chance of being selected as the sample for the study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). The selection of the sample is not influenced by the researcher and hence everyone is selected randomly or by chance through a procedure. This procedure included determining a number of students based on active enrolment in any of the English compulsory subjects at the university. Determining this number was based on the researcher's number of classes taught for that particular semester. This also means that every individual has a chance of being selected and that one individual being selected will not influence the selection of another individual.

This method of sampling is the best way to achieve a representative sample. This means that this representative sample are among 1090 students that were actively enrolled in any one of the university English subjects for that semester. Hence, a total of 215 students were randomly selected from three English compulsory courses that was running during the same semester that is Semester 2, 2015 – 2016. The courses are:

- 1) English for Academic Communication (Year 1 students)
- 2) English for Technical Communication (Year 2 students) and;
- 3) English for Professional Communication (Year 3 students)

In general, students enrolled in these courses have undergone these subjects according to the semester. Hence, students are of varied proficiency levels. These however, do not indicate inconsistencies of the results as the general premise of this study was explore the influence of ERP. All participants in this study then sat for two main tests, with pre- and post- tests for each instrument. These tests are explained briefly in the following section.

3.2 Instrument

This study utilized two main tests published by EPER. This includes Placement/ Progress Tests (PPT) and Extensive Reading Test (ERT). Both PPT and ERT are two different tests that are used in different ways. The two main purposes of PPT are to place students in a reading program and to monitor student's progress. For the PPT, EPER has versions A, B or E consisting of parallel versions 1 and 2 for each set. The current study utilized PPT version B for pre-tests and PPT version E for post-tests. Each test (i.e PPT B) consists of 12 passages of about 70 words with 150 gaps. Each passage increase in difficulty and the gaps are normally at every fifth or sixth word. Students are required to fill in each gap with one word. Some alternatives are accepted for some questions.

ERT on the other hand, is used to ensure whether the student is reading fluently at that level and ready to move to the next level (EPER, n.d.). ERT is a reading comprehension test that contains 8 passages with an average of 1000 words for each of the eight EPER levels. Each of which also consists of parallel versions 1 and 2. Each EPER level of graded readers consists of one reading passage. During an ERT each student will answer questions on two passages. For example, G and F or E and D. In general, the question test on global understanding that reflects the purpose of extensive reading as opposed to intensive reading.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

This study was conducted throughout an existing 14-week-course of the various English subjects at the university, where the class met twice a week. Each class meeting is 2 hours but time spent on ER project was approximately 30 minutes per week without any specific required time allocation. The reason for only allocating 30 minutes of the students' class time is because there are required syllabuses which need to be covered in each core subject taught by the instructors.

Data was collected in week two, where all the participants sat for Pre-tests (PPT B). This test was purchased from (EPER) to determine the reading level according to EPER reading levels E & D, C & B and A & X. Based on the results obtained in PPT B, each student from the experimental group was given the

opportunity to choose whichever novels they wanted to read based on their reading level (PPT B) or one level above their reading level (i.e. E and D, C and B or A and X). A total of 344 graded readers were equally distributed among four instructors. The graded readers selected were based on the list of graded readers purchased from EPER. The publishers were Macmillan Readers, Cambridge English Readers, Oxford Bookworm Series and Penguin Readers.

In week 3, ERT version 1 was administered among both groups. However, only students from the experimental group read novels out of classroom time and did various Extensive Reading enhancement activities in class during weeks 4-12. These activities were conducted for not more than half an hour per meeting and were based on Extensive Reading activities for teaching language (Bamford & Day, 2004). The instructors selected only 5 activities from the book which were adapted to suit the participants' needs in the study as well as to enrich soft skills elements among the students (Ruhil Amal, Zuraina & Ezihaslinda, 2014). Selected outcomes/products from the enhancement activities were then published with students' consent as a source of reference for future activities. In addition, students were required to read a minimum of 4 novels in order to be listed as actively participating in the ERP. They were encouraged to change titles every two weeks but some students were more actively reading and changed their book titles every week with two titles at every change. These students ended up reading a total of 20 novels during the course of the ER project. Therefore, post-tests which was conducted in week 13 (PPT E) and week 14 (ERT V2) reflected scores after 9 weeks for both control and experimental groups. Figure 1 summarizes the data collection procedures.



Figure 1. Data Collection Procedures.

RESULTS

This study adopted quantitative data analysis to interpret the results. All the data obtained was processed using SPSS version 20.0. Descriptive statistics were used to report the mean scores and standard deviations (SD) for each test. Based on Table 2, all minimum scores for PPT B, PPT E, ERT V1 and ERT V2 (two instruments with two versions each) for control group are surprisingly greater than minimum scores for the experimental group. For maximum scores, experimental group contributed higher scores compared to control group in PPT B, PPT E and ERT V1. While the maximum scores for ERT V2 for both groups gave the same scores. The mean scores for the experimental group for all tests are obviously greater than the mean scores recorded by three tests except the mean for PPT B in control group that is greater than mean scores recorded by experimental group.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Tests for Control and Experimental Groups.

Tests	Control Group				Experimental Group			
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
PPT B	19	68	41.22	10.131	18	73	41.18	10.852
PPT E	13	69	41.84	10.263	10	72	43.16	11.059
ERT V1	28	58	51.34	5.163	24	60	51.37	5.152
ERT V2	25	69	49.51	7.581	15	69	49.64	8.230

Inferential statistics were used to analyse data from pretests and posttests reading proficiency scores for control and experimental groups. The independent sample t-test were conducted to compare the scores obtained from both pre- and post - tests, between the control and experimental groups, with significance level determined at 0.05. This test investigates whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means in two unrelated groups. Results and discussion are presented in the following sections.

4.1 Reading Proficiency Scores

Based on Table 3, the results for research hypothesis 1 suggests that, there is no significant difference in the pre-test reading proficiency scores between the control and experimental groups ($p = 0.975$, $p > 0.05$). The result of the analysis indicated that there is no significant difference in the scores obtained by both groups in PPT B which was conducted in Week 2. This result supports the research hypothesis 1 which suggested that the pre-test reading proficiency scores (PPT B) for control group is equal to the pre-test reading proficiency scores (PPT B) for experimental group.

For research hypothesis 2, the result, $p = 0.376$ ($p > 0.05$) shows that there is no significant difference in the scores of post-test reading proficiency obtained by the control and experimental groups. The results indicated that there is no difference in the scores obtained by both groups in PPT E, which was conducted in Week 13. This result shows that the research hypothesis 2 is rejected. This suggests the treatment given to the experimental group is not significant.

Table 3. Pre-test and Post-test Reading Proficiency Score for Control and Experimental Groups.

Research Hypothesis	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	0.975
2	0.376

4.2 Extensive Reading Test Version 1 and Version 2

Based on Table 4, research hypothesis 3 shows that there is no significant difference in Extensive Reading Test version 1 between both groups ($p=0.974$, $p>0.05$), therefore, at 0.05 significance level, we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the result of the extensive reading tests between both groups. This result supports the research hypothesis 3 that suggest the performances for both groups do not differ since the experimental group did not receive any treatment yet in Week 3.

For research hypothesis 4, Table 4 shows that $p= 0.907$. Since $p>0.05$, therefore we can conclude that there is no significant difference in the result of the extensive reading tests between both groups. Therefore, at a significance level of 0.05, the research hypothesis 4 is rejected. This also suggests the treatment given to the experimental group is not significant.

Table 4. Extensive Reading Test Version 1 and Version 2 for Control and Experimental Groups Result.

Research Hypothesis	Sig. (2-tailed)
3	0.974
4	0.907

DISCUSSION

This study examined four hypotheses. To answer all research hypotheses 1, 2, 3 and 4, the researchers conducted independent sample t-test. The first analysis conducted was Pre-Test Reading Proficiency Scores for Control Group and Experimental Group. The result ($p = 0.975$, $p > 0.05$) showed that there is no significant difference in student's performance in pre-test reading proficiency scores (PPT B), which was conducted in Week 2 for both Control and Experimental Groups. This result supports the hypothesis where both groups are in equal level. The experimental group did not get any treatment yet, which supports their achievement in the PPT B that did not differ with the achievement of students in the control group. In addition, similar results were also achieved for Post-Test Reading Proficiency Scores for Control Group and Experimental Group. This result, $p = 0.376$, $p > 0.05$ suggests that there is no significant difference in student's performance in Post-test reading proficiency scores (PPT E) for Control and Experimental Groups. Similar results were obtained in a study that found no statistically significant gain from both the intervention and control groups in their reading proficiency post-test scores and concluded that ER did not have positive effect in reading proficiency (Ying-Chun, 2015). However, this study was focused on the effect of ER while learners were taught reading strategy. The current study on the other hand, focused more on the effect of two groups.

In order to answer research hypotheses 3 and 4, similar analyses were also conducted. Independent sample t-test also suggests that there was no significant difference in the learner's achievement for Extensive Reading Version 1 (ERT V1), ($p=0.974$, $p>0.05$) and Extensive Reading Version 2 (ERT V2), ($p=0.907$, $p>0.05$) for both groups. The results of these analyses certainly make us wonder about the effectiveness of the programs that have been carried out during the whole semester. People might argue if the gains are only motivational, then extensive reading is not worth the trouble for the teacher (Morgado, 2009).

The results which showed no significant difference between pre- and post-tests might have been influenced by the short time span between the pre- and post-tests. The results might be different if longer time duration were given for the learners to spend on their reading before the post-test was conducted again. In his study of an ER class in an intensive semester, Zacharias (2017) showed that learners need different types of approach in doing ERP, therefore, understanding their needs and ascertaining whether the curriculum will allow these activities should be part of the planning of the program in order to increase the learners' motivation (Day & Bamford, 2002).

Another major concern is learners' motivation is low. The learners too were occupied to spend more time on texts from their core courses which could have interfered in their focus on reading the graded novels provided. Implementing a successful ERP is especially challenging for learners who lack the desire to read extensively (Lituanas, Jacobs & Renandya, 1999). Hence, instructors who conduct ERP must provide more enticing and motivating tasks to spur learners' interest in reading books and accommodate the challenges of implementing a successful ERP (Zacharias, 2017). Underlying this recommendation is the belief that cultivating learners' motivation in learning largely depends on the creativity of the instructors (Dörnyei, 2001) and the very core of ER is developing reading fluency is better in a classroom where the learners are motivated and enjoy the learning process.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that there were no significant differences after conducting ERP for both control and experimental groups. Although a well conducted ER program can make a significant impact on reading proficiency (Lituanas et. al., 2001), developing ER habit in an ESL university can be rather challenging (Chiu, 2015). Unlike in school settings, where teachers can include ER into the timetable, as observed in this particular study, it is definitely a challenge to include ER into the formal university curriculum. This is because ER requires more than thirty minutes of the lesson time. Hence, modifications and changes should be implemented to the timetable and modules should include ER as part of the lesson plan. A careful planning of the curriculum structure and implementation schedule should be discussed thoroughly at diversified levels to ensure all factors are taken into account before ER can be adopted into

the formal university curriculum. Thus, it is deemed important to obtain cooperation from all parties involving students, instructors, and administrators to realize the success of the program at the university level.

However, there were several limitations that could be identified in the study. Firstly, ERP was embedded into an existing English course and not as a stand-alone. This limited the researchers' time to conduct more exciting activities. To make it more effective, universities should offer ER as part of their reading programs or courses. To encourage this extensive reading program/ course among students - especially L2, researchers need to ensure 9 books are read by the students for the duration of a study or alternatively 5 books need to be assigned to learners to ensure the success of extensive reading program/ course (Robb & Kano, 2013; Shue, 2003). Secondly, the study took place in one semester, which was for only 14 weeks. To effectively implement ER in the university curriculum, the duration of the study can be extended to perhaps two semesters (24 weeks) and not merely embedding the program into a 14 week of teaching and learning period.

Furthermore, students' reading progress should be closely monitored by instructors or facilitators in charge by organising a scheduled meeting once a week or every fortnightly as a record of the students' achievement. The monitoring will also help to boost the students' motivation to read more and also for them to feel that the program is important and that their every effort is being credited and acknowledged by their instructors. Lastly, there was a limitation on the number of novels for selection. It would be best if universities could provide additional novels for students to choose from. This in turn would lead to motivation to read.

Clarity (2007) noted that in order to encourage students to enjoy reading, teachers need to put their effort by sacrificing their class time to do extensive reading activities. Support from teachers, students as well as the university management is crucial to ensure the program is a success. Teachers, therefore, may use graphic organisers to be one of the methods that can be implemented in class with the aim of teaching ER; especially employing non-fiction genres, among language learners. Damayanti (2019) proposed that chronological order, compare and contrast, and description passage organisers are very useful for the passages that are related to such genres. With these in mind, language gains would be achieved.

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